

Around Town with the Town Manager #8

On Tuesday, July 27, 2010, a milestone occurred for the development of a new police facility. The Select Board and the School Board met in a joint meeting. As a result of the meeting, the School Board voted to grant the Town use of eight acres of land for a new police facility. Four of the acres are for the proposed facility. The other four acres will mitigate the two acres of land that will be disturbed to build the facility including its parking and driveway. To comply with Act 68, the Education Funding law, the Town will now proceed to secure an independent appraisal of these eight acres including their "lease value." This is the value that the Town will match annually and offer the School District for use of the eight acres.

The police project is an issue that has caused much debate and, regrettably, some divides in our community. We still have a long way to go before we get approval to break ground for this new police facility. For all readers I ask everyone to consider the police officers. They are impacted by our decisions and by our community's division. They are saddened because in some manner they feel a sense of responsibility for the controversy. They are not! We, the townspeople, rely on the police for our safety and wellbeing 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. Many of our officers have devoted their professional lives and careers to Colchester and its residents. For the forty plus years the Department has been in existence, our police officers have worked in quarters that should be an embarrassment to everyone.

The history that got us to this point began back in 2006 and I will use the rest of this column to review the development of police facility project. I must omit many facts for the sake of brevity and I do understand that some of you will take exception to my remarks. In 2006 the town administration, with Select Board approval, contracted an architect to develop a concept plan for building a new Town Hall and refurbishing the old Town Hall into a police facility. The architect assessed the cost of this project to be about \$8 million dollars. The Select Board said "no" – on their assessment that the voters would never approve that costly a bond. They sent us back to the drawing board with new orders.

Those orders consisted of scaling back the costs of the Town Hall and allocating \$750,000 to improve the Town Garage that would be incorporated into a Select Board supportable bond for \$6.2 million dollars. Additionally, the Select Board ordered that a Citizen Committee be created to verify the building needs and assist the town administration in developing an acceptable proposal for a new Town Hall, a retrofitted Police Station, and expanded garage. The citizen committee became known as the Buildings Option Committee and was chaired by Michelle Penca.

A redesign to the proposed Town Hall yielded an estimated cost of \$4.2 million. Adding this sum to the authorized garage amount of \$750,000 left \$1.25 million for the refurbishment of the (old) Town Hall into a police station. The original plans to rehabilitate the (old) Town Hall into a police station were estimated to cost about \$2.5

million. Out of the redesign, the police were allocated one half of that amount to refurbish the (old) Town Hall. A large portion of the rehab expenses, \$850,000, for the (old) Town Hall were to upgrade the electrical system to current code and replace two separate heating and air conditioning systems with a unified efficient equipment to serve both floors of the facility. Additionally, since the Police Station was to be on two floors, an elevator had to be added along with sprinkling both floors. Those building “infrastructure” upgrades consumed most of the money to refurbish the building. Alternatively, the Town could have constructed the rooms within the building and constructed a sally port for securely transporting people under arrest from a police car to a holding cell and minimally addressing the required infrastructure improvements to the building itself.

Neither option pleased the Police Department or the Select Board. While this debate was occurring, the new Town Hall was being constructed and built for approximately \$3.6 million – or \$600,000 less than anticipated. This sum added to the \$1.25 million moved the Police Station closer to the financial needs to address both its use of space and mechanical needs. We now began to ask: is rehabilitating the old Town Hall a wise use of almost \$2 million? In answer to that question, a local contractor informed the Select Board that a “design built” facility could be constructed for about the same price. The advantages to the design built facility are: (1) it would be expandable later as needs arose and (2) it would meet and conform to current safety and building standards for a police station. The drawback was that the building would have to be constructed on an open piece of land since taking down the old Town Hall was too expensive and the lot was too small.

While deliberating what to do, the School Board offered to consider donating acreage for the police facility on its land by Laker Lane and Blakely Road. Since school land is under Act 250 jurisdiction, the Town would have to address a number of environmental issues in order to secure an Act 250 permit. The Town began that process almost two years ago. The land was absolved of having any endangered plant species on it. However, the State Agency of Natural Resources claimed the building would be on “sand plain” (an artifact of the last ice age 10,000 years ago) which had to be “mitigated.” After more than a year’s discussion, the State agreed to a mitigation factor of “2 for 1” land disturbance – meaning the police facility, its parking lot and driveway would require two acres plus another four “mitigating” acres of school land to be set aside in perpetuity. The School Board allowed the Town to encumber eight acres of its land, bringing this saga back to where I began at the start of today’s column.

As people will recall moving the Police facility from the (old) Town Hall to Laker Lane/Blakely Road, the Town had to secure voter approval. This approval won by twenty four (24) votes – demonstrating that residents were very much divided over the location of this police facility. As the debate evolved, it became – from my perspective as Town Manager – very vitriolic with the added chaos of misinformation and rumors. The negativity impacts the debate to this day and I worry about the long term consequences of a community divided by anger with the Town and the School District.